

Homily based on the readings from August 18, 2024 (Proverbs 9.1-6; Ephesians 5.15-20; John 6.51-58)

As some of you may recall, there was an unsettling study that came out from the Pew Research Center in 2019 – which asserted that fewer than a third of American Catholics understand and believe the Church’s teachings regarding the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. At least in part, this finding helped motivate the ongoing National Eucharistic Revival – and, more specifically, the National Eucharistic Congress that took place in Indianapolis this past month. By all accounts, the Eucharistic Congress – along with the Eucharistic Pilgrimage that preceded it – was a resounding success, an extraordinary blessing to our country and to our Church. Even before the Eucharistic Congress, though, there were questions about the accuracy of the Pew report. Another study, published in 2022, came to almost exactly the opposite conclusion: namely that the doctrine of the Real Presence is accepted by almost 70 percent of churchgoing Catholics.

Regardless of which set of figures we accept, there is certainly cause for concern. If there is even *one* practicing Catholic who rejects the Church's teachings on the Eucharist – either willfully or out of ignorance – that is one too many. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to fixate on the results of a *survey*. What matters most of all – really, the only thing that matters – is the way people encounter our Risen Lord through their *worship*.

I want to turn our attention now to a slightly unusual subject. Whether we realize it or not, there are a large number of rules and regulations pertaining to how the Mass is conducted and how people receive the Holy Eucharist. Most of these can be found in a document known as the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* – sometimes referred to as the *GIRM* (G-I-R-M). Even though the GIRM is fairly technical, it still worth taking the time to read it carefully. Every single item is there for a reason, and that reason is usually to reaffirm our *core* belief that Jesus Christ is *really and truly* present – Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity – in the Holy Eucharist. For example, consider the rules relating to the

chalice that holds the Precious Blood and the ciborium that holds the consecrated hosts:

Sacred vessels should be made from *precious metal*. If they are made from metal that rusts or from a metal less precious than gold, they should generally be gilded *on the inside*. (328)

Why would anyone gild the *inside* of a cup, which most of us will never see? The answer, of course, is that what *really* matters is not what *you and I* can see, but what actually comes into *contact* with Jesus Christ himself.

Another requirement mentioned in the GIRM is that each church must be equipped with a *sacrarium* – a sink that has been outfitted with “a special pipe and drain that empty directly into the earth, rather than into the sewer system.” Even the *water* that is used to *wash* the objects that have touched the Body and Blood of Christ must be treated with dignity and respect.

I could go on further, but the *point* is that every aspect of our churches' architecture and furnishings – not to mention the structure of the Mass itself – is designed to emphasize the reality of Christ's presence among us. The question all of us need to consider – honestly and without making excuses – is whether or not we *ourselves* embody this fundamental reality. In other words, do our own words and actions reflect the beliefs we profess regarding the Eucharist?

Over the years, I have heard a dozen versions of the following story, all of which I believe to be authentic: a lifelong Catholic is discussing religion with a friend or coworker who belongs to some Protestant denomination. When the question of the Eucharist comes up, the Protestant expresses skepticism – not in the Church's teaching, but in whether or not the Catholic actually *believes* it. “If I *really* thought Jesus Christ was sitting just a few feet away from me,” the Protestant says, “you would not be able to pick me up off the floor.”

While I am not suggesting that we behave in ways that would be distracting to our fellow worshippers, I *do* believe we should all take this message to heart. Every one of us should take the time to envision the following scenario: if somebody who is not Catholic were studying *us* – and only us – at Mass, what conclusions would that person draw relating to the Holy Eucharist? Are we fully engaged with what is taking place here and now, or are we preoccupied with what we will be having for lunch afterwards? Are we saying the prayers with sincerity and fervor, or are we simply mouthing them out of habit? Are we focused on our encounter with *Jesus Christ*, or are we paying more attention to the outfits and behaviors of the people sitting around us? Looking at ourselves from *that* perspective, most of us – myself *most certainly* included – would not be happy with what we see.

Fortunately for all of us, the *reality* of the Eucharist does not depend, even to the slightest degree, on what any of us *do* or what we *fail* to do – or even how we respond when a pollster calls with a survey. All that matters is the promise that Christ himself has given us:

I am the living bread that came down from heaven;
whoever eats this bread will live forever;
and the bread that I will give
is my flesh for the life of the world.

Whenever we say *Amen* as we receive the Holy Eucharist, it is *this* fact we are affirming. Our *challenge* is to live out that *Amen* – throughout the entirety of the Mass, but more importantly throughout the entirety of our lives.